



**INTERWOVEN LIVES: EXPLORING CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS IN
ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES***

¹Ramya Bharathi K and Ganga Parameswari T²
¹Research Scholar and Associate Professor of English²,
^{1,2}V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women,
Virudhunagar, Tamilnadu, India.

Corresponding Author's mail ID: 23phde06@vvvcollege.org

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the tapestry of relationship among characters in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*, emphasizing how these interwoven lives reflect broader themes of identity, belonging, and cultural memory. Dual narration of the characters plays a vital role throughout the novel. This dual narration shows the theme of love and loss that shape their experiences amidst the backdrop of Cyprus's complex history. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis with cultural theory, this research elucidates how Shafak's narrative techniques—such as non-linear storytelling and rich symbolism—enhance the depth of character relationships. Furthermore, this article emphasizes on the interconnectedness between the characters, in the face of fragmentation that prevails in the novel. This study also delves into the role of nature as a character, examining how the fig tree embodies resilience and continuity amid human conflict. Ultimately, the findings reveal that these connections not only drive the plot but also serve as a microcosm of the societal tensions that define the characters' lives, fostering a deeper understanding of the interplay between personal and collective histories.

Keywords: Identity, Cultural Memory, Dual Narration, Trauma, Displacement

INTRODUCTION

Elif Shafak is an award-winning Turkish-British author, academic, and public intellectual, known for her works on diverse social, cultural, and political issues,

particularly those concerning identity, migration, and gender. She writes in both Turkish and English and is recognized for blending Eastern and Western literary

traditions, often weaving together themes that explore the human experience in complex and nuanced ways. She has also been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Her novel *The Island of Missing Trees* is about how people are displaced to a foreign land away from their motherland. This displacement has its effect on the generation after. Migrating to a new land has greatly impacted both the animate and (in) animate characters which carries the plot further in an intriguing way. It is not only a love story between a Christian Greek and a Turkish Muslim that had to move to a new land—England from Cyprus, but the novel also talks about themes of belongingness and a sense of identity, memory and trauma, as well as nature and renewal.

The narrative is told alternately between past and present and is in line with how the characters are experiencing emotional conflict in positioning the present that is very much burdened by their past. Displacement is one of the main themes that are usually pictured in a Diasporic Literature. Specifically, the characters have to migrate from the motherland usually because of conflicting issues they experience such as economic, political, or social issues and have to move to a new land that seems to give them a sense of security and stability (Sabbah & Ayuningtyas 2022).

CONFLICT AND IDENTITY

Kostas, the protagonist of the story, who grew in Cyprus was in a forbidden relationship with Defne, a Turk. He is sent away to London where he constantly finds it difficult to adapt to the new land.

What I meant was, some people stand in front of a tree and the first thing they notice is the trunk. These are the ones who prioritize order, safety, rules, continuity [...] I think I was in the first group. I longed for a sense of order, security (Shafak 327).

He manages to negotiate well between his past and present. Though his condition of displacement is painful, he still prioritises continuity in moving his life forward in the new land.

The character Defne, on the other hand, shows a different way of coping with the harsh effect of war, separation, and displacement. In the beginning part of the story, Defne is pictured as a free-spirited person who is drawn to freedom and change. She is left behind by Kostas and has to experience the painful conflict in her motherland. She shows some psychological changes after her displacement as she can't seem to overcome her traumatic past and memory. The diaspora communities encounter series of physical, emotional, and psychological disconnections from their homeland,

resulting in formation or experience of collective trauma, nostalgia, and memory. Through Defne, we can see how some of those who experienced displacement from their homeland are disconnected with their homeland (Raina 2017). Though the author bestows her as a loving wife of Kostas and mother of Ada, she gets addicted to alcohol and sunk in depression which later becomes the cause for her death. “Her death had nothing to do with the absence of love...but underneath something was strangling her—the past, the memories, the roots” (Shafak 334). The recurrent memory of her motherland has resulted in her depression. This collective experience of trauma, nostalgia, and memory has made her physically, emotionally and psychologically feel disconnected from her homeland. Sezen Unluonen in a Howard review stated that “Through the love story of Kostas and Defne, Shafak crafts a narrative where personal relationships are deeply intertwined with the scars of political and cultural division. Their relationship is emblematic of hope, resilience, and the struggle to bridge irreconcilable divides” (Unluonen 2021).

Another striking character is Ada, described as a British Kid who has never been to Cyprus. The novel has dual narration from the point of view of Ada and the Fig tree. Ada experiences the

effects of displacement in relation to the matter of sense of belonging. Unlike her father and mother, Ada has not experienced war and displacement directly. She copes well in her new land. Although she does not experience the pain and trauma of her parents, their past still haunts her. “If we want our child to have a good future, we have to cut her off from our past” (Shafak 317). In this quotation said by Defne to Kostas, it can be seen how Ada does not have any deep understanding of what has happened in her parents’ past and anything related to their lives back in Cyprus. Ada’s parents intentionally try to disconnect her ties with her Cyprus roots. Her indirect experience of the brutality of the past leads to an unclear opinion about her roots. In order to overcome her confusion, she needs to ‘unearth silences’ to fully understand her place in the world (sense of self).

NATURE AS A CHARACTER

The narrative is mainly told by a fig tree, an unusually talkative tree. Shafak has given a human-like quality to this tree. It recalls the life on Cyprus and the devastating effects of war that happened long back in its native land. “Trees are often associated with passivity because of its inability to move, but in the 19th century, in his writings the naturalist Henry David Thoreau represented trees as

beings with their own agency”. (Howard 390). “A tree is a memory keeper. Tangled beneath our roots, hidden inside our trunks, are the sinews of history, the ruins of war nobody came to win, the bones of the missing” (Shafak 213).

This tree has witnessed the miseries and sorrows of its people, especially of the life of Kazantzakis family. The Fig tree is an inanimate being in the novel and the most influential character. Due to the Civil war that happened in the Island, Cyprus in 1974, Kostas uprooted it and plants it in London. Here, the tree feels a sense of displacement. It laments over Human's behaviour towards nature. In between the novel, the Fig tree explains the medicinal values of Flora and how human beings exploit and destroy them. It also chides humans for their immature attitude which leads to many environmental problems. Many other animal characters also take up a role in narrating their side of the story. Chico, a Mexican parrot tells about the life of its masters, Yusuf and Yiorgos, who are also the victim of prejudices and civil terror. Other animals like the Ant, mouse and honeybee describe the events that they noticed on their way. These inanimate beings help one understand the joy, love, loss and the pain of Cypriots.

All the characters throughout the story show how they are not only trying to cope with the tension between cultures/nations, but also how they each try to negotiate between past and present. The narrative is told alternately between past and present and is in line with how the characters are experiencing emotional conflict in positioning the present that is very much burdened by their past.

CONCLUSION

Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* provides a deeper discernment into each character's motivations, fears, and desires, revealing how past decisions and actions shape present relationships. Ada, her parents, and the tree highlight the familial bonds and generational trauma. The actions and choices of Shafak's characters reverberate through the lives of others, creating a sense of interconnectedness that emphasizes the theme of collective experience. The Fig tree symbolizes life, memory, and connection, serving as a witness to human stories. The tree represents both a literal and metaphorical connection among the characters. This paper shows how the interconnectedness of characters inflates the narrative's depth, transforming the passive, isolated characters into a complex. Further this paper explores how every

animate and inanimate being's lives are interwoven through dynamic interplay of characters, thus navigating the loss of belonging and identity. It also reflects the overarching themes of transformation and resilience.

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